CHARLES O'MALLEY

BY CHARLES LEVER

1806 — 1872

"Charles O'Malley, the Irish Dragoon," is a story eminently characteristic of the works of Lever. To read it and thoroughly enjoy it one wants to be not over twenty-one. At that age one can "split their sides" laughing over the sayings and doings of Mickey Free and will see nothing improbable in the remarkable exploits of the youthful hero. In maturer years one is apt to regard O'Malley as a bombastic young ruffian whose morals and education sadly need looking after. Like all of Lever's works, also, the story is marked by his bitter attacks upon the clergy of the Catholic church, which are calculated to offend not only Catholics but men of every religion by reason of their self-evident unfairness and patent animus. Thackery's burlesque of Lever's works, "Phil Fogharty," is scarcely an exaggeration of "Charles O'Malley." Yet Charles O'Malley was immensely popular in its day—it was published in 1841—and is much read now. For, with all their defects and the ludicrous bombast which fills them, Lever's works have made a place for themselves by sheer force of their literary merit, which is not inconsiderable. In depicting army life and scenes of the battle and the march Lever excels and his charter drawing is admirable—even though the characters he draws are not.

Mr. Godfrey O'Malley, member of the Irish Parliament, was devising with his friends, "Billy" Considine, who had seen service in Austria, won a title there and was generally called Count, and Sir Harry Boyle. The question before them was how O'Malley could get safely down to his castle in Galway, where he proposed to stand for a re-election. His creditors in Dublin, where the session of Parliament which gave him exemption from their annoyance being ended, were hot upon his trail. Once down in his native West creditors would not matter. A devoted peasantry would go to any lengths for Godfrey O'Malley—except to the length of paying rent—and would break the head of any bailiff who dared to put in an appearance on the ancestral domain of the O'Malleys.

As a way out of the difficulty O'Malley resolved to die temporarily and after rejecting a death notice written by Sir Harry stating that he had "dropped down dead after dinner of a lingering illness brought on by the debates in the House" the three friends succeeded in concocting a more convincing statement, the "Count" announcing that he would challenge any one who dared to doubt its truth. Considine was a duelist whose name inspired terror. So Godfrey O'Malley "died" in Dublin, had a mock funeral which got him safely into the country and came to life again to hasten to O'Malley Castle and begin his canvass. The story of how he had outwitted his Dublin creditors reached Galway and added immensely to his popularity.

O'Malley lived at his castle in a patriarchal way, and if people seldom paid O'Malley, O'Malley seldom paid anybody, and so managed to keep up a bountiful hospitality surrounded by a small army of ragged retainers and rollicking friends. He had good horses in the stables, had his hunting and his carousing; ale and wine flowed and the kitchen chimney was always sending out an oily smoke which savored of rough but plentiful feasting within. At O'Malley Castle lived Godfred's nephew, Charles, a boy of eighteen, an orphan both of mother and father, and a good deal of a chip of the old block. He was the best horseman in Galway, lived an out-of-doors life and was a marvel in all athletic sports and pastimes. As to his skill with the pistols, his marksmanship was little short of a wonder.

It was resolved by Godfrey and his advisers to send off this modest and unassuming youth to the house of a Mr. Blake, a distant relative, who lived some twelve miles from the castle, to see what could be done toward winning him to the side of Godfrey in the impending election. Godfrey and Blake were not on good terms, but Blake might be approached, it was agreed, by a younger member of the family with propriety. It should be stated that Godfrey had long been a widower, and some idea of the character of the friends who surrounded him may be gleaned from the advice showered upon Charles as he set out for Mr. Blake's.

"Insist upon it that I am sure of the election anyway," said Godfrey, "but that for family reasons he should stand by me—people are talking about it in the country." "And drop a hint," added Considine, "that O'Malley is greatly improved in his shooting." "And don't get drunk too early in the evening," said another, "for Phil Blake has beautiful claret." "And be sure you don't make love to the red-headed girls," advised one. "he has four of them, each more sinfully ugly than the other." "You'll play whist, too," said Sir Harry, "and don't mind losing a few pounds. Mrs. Blake, long life to her, has a playful way of turning up the king."

Charles found Mr. Blake's house filled with guests, and among them was a Sir George Dashwood and his motherless daughter, Lucy, a girl a trifle younger than Charles. There was also a Captain Hammersley, who seemed to be rather attentive to Lucy and who at once excited in the heart of Charles a desire to murder him or disgrace him. Sir George was a general in the army, Hammersley was one of its ornaments and there were many other military men among the guests. The four red-headed daughters of Blake and all the other women in the house appeared to think a man not in the army a negligible quantity, which angered the modest Charles still more.

The mind of the young man was so full of himself, Lucy and his dislike of Hammerlsley that he naturally forgot to convey to Mr. Blake immediately the object of his visit and contented himself with "putting up a job" upon the Captain. There was to be a fox hunt the next day, and Charles arranged with one of the huntsmen to take the captain over a course which would, in all probability, break his neck. Said the huntsman: "I'll take him down by Woodford, over the Devil's Mouth—it's eighteen foot wide this minute with the late rains—into the four callows; then over the stone walls down to Dangan; then take a short cast up the hill and blow him a bit and give him the park wall at the tope. You must come in fresh then and give him the whole home run over Sleibhmich; your horse, the Badger, knows it all, and takes the road always on the fly. But for a strange horse it is mighty distressing. Well, if the captain lives through this give him the sunken fence and the stone wall at Mr. Blake's clover field, for the hounds will run into the fox about there, and though we never ride that leap since Mr. Malone broke his neck at it last October, yet, upon this occasion—"

"To be sure," replied the high-minded Charles—and gave the huntsman a guinea. Neither Charles nor his biographer, Mr. Lever, appears to have entertained the slightest doubt but that this plan to break the captain's neck by adventure in which Charles's danger would be reduced to a minemum and Hammersley's raised to the maximum was other than a most honorable and chivalrous proceeding—and doubtless both would have "called out" the men who dared to intimate such a thing—though very nearly so—and the gentle Charles himself got a fall which laid him up for a few days. Of course the magnificent riding of the young man endeared him to all the company stopping at the house and Lucy Dashwood was so nice to him that he found himself desperately in love with her.

As soon as the modest youth was able to take his meals at the table he proceeded to get very drunk at dinner and threw a glass of wine into the face of a man who made some uncomplimentary allusions to his uncle Godfrey. He sobered enough to explain the object of his visit and learned to his chagrin, that Sir George Dashwood was down there to canvass the county against the Lord of O'Malley Castle and that Mr. Blake was engaged on the side of Sir George.

Charles flew to the castle confided his case to Considine, who delighted at the opportunity to arrange a duel for the boy with the man into whose face he had thrown the wine, a Mr. Bodkin. Charles hit Bodkin just above the hip and Bodkin's bullet made a hole in the hat of the valliant boy. Uncle Godfrey and his cronies were enraptured at this display of spirit, and when the elections came on the whole occurrence, of course, redounded to the credit of the O'Malleys. A mob drove the adherents of Sir George from the polls in some places and in others it was evident that Godfrey had a decided majority. Sir George Dashwood withdrew from the contest and Godfrey O'Malley was once more a member of Parliament.

In the riots which attended the election Charles had the good fortune to save Lucy Dashwood from the hands of some ruffians who had seized the carriage in which she was riding. When Charley tried to retake the carriage one ruffian took Lucy in his arms and threatened to throw her into the river if O'Malley did not desist. But Charles, with great bravery, leaped into the carriage, did for the ruffiian and saved Lucy—for which of course, Sir George was deeply grateful and vowed himself his fast friend. In fact Charles had so conducted himself that not only his uncle's friends but all of the opposition regarded him with wonder and admiration.

Now though Charley was versed on many things, his knowledge of books was extremely limited, and after the excitement of the election was over Uncle Godfrey bethought himself that it was time to pick out a career for his nephew. It was resolved in solemn council of Godfrey and his cronies that Charles should go up to Dublin and become a lawyer. Charles himself wanted to be a soldier—a dragoon, for from his experience at Mr. Blake's house he was of the opinion that the profession of arms was the only one which was calculated to lend glamour to a young man in the eyes of the fair sex. But Godfrey could not think of letting his beloved nephew go away from him into the dangers and separations of a campaign and, as the Napoleonic wars were then on, soldiering was a trade which took many away from home never to return.

Now, with all his marvelous abilities and perfections, Charley O'Malley was a dutiful nephew, and so he went to Dublin and was entered at Trinity College. Here he was assigned as room-mate to a Mr. Webber, who had been three years at the college and was still in the freshman class. Mr. Webber's undoubted abilities were devoted to such learned pursuits as midnight suppers, making things lively for the faculty, parading Dublin streets in disguise as an old beggar woman, and raising "rows and ructions" with the townspeople. O'Malley entered heartily into these learned pursuits, and would probably have been still at Trinity in the freshman class—as Mr. Webber was at last accounts—had he not found in the Irish metropolis his friend, Sir George Dashwood, and his daughter.

Sir George, of course, invited him to his house, and Charles had an opportunity of becoming more and more enraptured with the charming Lucy But the nthere was Captain Hammersley always hanging about, and, though the Captain and Charles had become the best of friends, it was an understood thing between them that the Captain was the accepted suitor of Lucy. The Peninsula war was going on then—the one which Sir Arthur Wellesley and O'Malley afterward took charge of and carried to such a successful issue against the legions of France. One day Sir George Dashwood announced to Charles that he had had him gazetted as a cornet in a cavalry regiment which was about to sail from Cork to join the army in Portugal. He had, Sir George said, consulted Godfrey O'Malley about the matter, and Godfrey had consented that his nephew should don the uniform.

Charles was delighted. To be sure, his foreign duty would take him away from Lucy, but then Captain Hammersley was already in Portugal with his regiment, and as a soldier might not an O'Malley hope to win such distinction in arms as would recommend him to a soldier's daughter and enable him to "cut out" Hammersley? Fred Powers, a great friend and boon companion of Webber, was going out on the same transport, and Charles O'Malley now began to pay his vows to Mars with the hope that they would be heeded at the shrine of Cupid.

After having been nearly entrapped into marrying the daughter of a major in the commissary department at Cork, Charles got safely aboard the transport, and in due course arrived at Lisbon. The incident of the major's daughter at Cork was soon forgotten, for Charles O'Malley loved Lucy Dashwood. However that susceptible Irish heart of his might make him appear at times to wander from his allegiance, his condition was well expressed by the words of a once popular song:

"No matter what you do if your heart be true,
And his heart was true to Poll."

It was a new world into which Charles O'Malley, now the Irish dragoon, was introduced upon his arrival at Lisbon—a world of war and fighting, but one from which love "on the side" was not entirely eliminated. Needless to say, he at once excited the admiration or the envy of all His Majesty's forces and was invited everywhere, while while generals profusely offered him appointments on their staffs.

One day as Charles came thundering down a Lisbon street, mounted upon his proud and unmanageoable charger, that is, a charger which would have been unmanageable to any one but an O'Malley, the people scampering away from him as he rode, in terror and admiration, he saw a beautiful young senorita who was trying to cross the street stand transfixed with fear before him and his horse. The beautiful girl could not move, and on the other side of her was a huckster's car drawn by a donkey. Charles took in the situation at a glance, and, giving his charger the spur, raised him in the air and jumped him clean over the huckster, the cart and the donkey, thereby saving the girl's life, who otherwise would have been trampled to death beneath the iron-shod hoofs of the charger.

Now, this beautiful creature proved to be the daughter of Don Manuel de Blancas-y-Silviero, who had money enough to pay off all the mortgages in Galway. When Charley made the leap over the cart ,the very air rang with the acclamations of the multitude, and a thousand bravos saluted the feat, while the name of the daring and gallant dragoon was passed from mouth to mouth. So it is no wonder that the youth received that afternoon a note from Don Manuel inviting him to his house, or that all the officers who had not yet had the honor of a presentation to the young hero sought one immediately.

When Charley heard the name of the girl whose life he had saved by not riding her down he was struck with a remembrance. On his arrival off the Portuguese coast he had met a young midshipman named Howard, who had intrusted to him a packet directed to this same Inez, and Charles had promised to deliver it. The ensign was on his way with his ship to the Mediterranean, and had told O'Malley that he was desperately in love with Inez.

It struck O'Malley that now was a good time to deliver the packet. Bright thoughts like this occasionally occurred to him. He quickly became an intimate of the household of Don Manuel, and was looked upon as the favorite suitor of the fair Inez. When he delivered the packet from poor Howard the laughing girl asked him what he had done with the lock of hair which the midshipman said in his letter he had inclosed. Charles though he might have left the packet containing the lock of hair at his lodgings. But as search failed to disclose it, he cut a lock from his own head, just over the right temple, and gave that to Inez, pretending that it was the one Howard had sent.

But Inez, laughing in his face, told him that Howard's hair was black while his was "auburn"—and kept the lock for O'Malley's sake. Howard, she said, was only one of her many admirers—she always had a number—and she really did not care for the sailor boy. So Inez flirted with Charles and Charles made love to Inez, and neither of them took the matter very seriously. But the public did, and so did a certain Captain Trevyllian, who scowled at O'Malley when the two met at Don Manuel's house. Now, before Charles had left Dublin he had made a call upon Lucy Dashwood, told her he loved her, but knew he could never win her love in return, and so would say farewell.

Lucy had answered in a manner which Charles thought did not deny that her affections were engaged elsewhere. To Powers, Lucy had confided a packet for Captain Hammersley. Powers, being ordered to the front soon after reaching Lisbon, left the packet with Charles. It was after the battle of the Duoro, which took place not long after the arrival of the reinforcements (and at which O'Malley performed with great valor, and was wounded in the arm) that he resolved to call from the captain. Hammersley congratulated O'Malley upon his bravery and upon his promotion to a lieutenancy, which had come as a result of his martial exploits, and remarked that Powers had told him Charles had a packet for him.

O'Malley delivered the packet into the captain's hands and as he opened it a miniature fell out. It was a picture of the captain himself, re-

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